

CHILDE HAROLD COMES BACK

By Sewell Ford

IF Swifty Joe Gallagher hadn't been born to be the best first assistant director of physical culture on West 43d street, and bar none, he'd still be useful—as a watch dog. You ought to see him work when he thinks he's guardin' the sanctity of the studio's front office. Says he has old Horatius at the bridge lookin' like a quitter. Any panhandler or gas mantle agent or member of the Down-and-Out Club that gets by him has got to leak through the keyhole.

I remember here one day a while back how Swifty pokes his head through the gym door and announces out of the left side of his mouth that somebody wants to have speech with me. And I could tell by the way Swifty wore his face that he was tryin' to register deep disgust.

"Well, don't he give a name?" I asks.

"Nah!" says Swifty. "Not that bird. If he did it wouldn't be the right one. I tells him to take a hop, pronto, but he puts up a whine about how he's got to see you, so I leaves him on the outside mat while I passes you the word. Shall I give him the shunt?"

I expect I should have taken Swifty's judgment on the case, for he seldom misses spottin' a touch artist, but, havin' half an hour to kill before lunch, I decides to do the shoo'in' myself.

"Oh, I might as well hear his tale," says I. "Let him trickle in, Swifty. I'll be out in a minute."

I knew I'd made a mistake, though, as soon as I got a glimpse of this seedy party with the slack underlip and the ingrown chin.

"Hello, Shorty!" says he. "I expect you don't remember me, eh?"

"Your manner's familiar enough," says I, "and your face ain't at all strange, but I don't connect you with any name."

"No, you wouldn't," says he. "It's Stuckey—Jim Stuckey."

"Sounds like a good fit," says I. "Stew-ky. Huh! Just where have our paths crossed before, Jim?"

"Why," says he, "I used to be your fav-rite waiter at the old chop house, you know."

"I never did have much sense when it came to pickin' out waiters," says I. "Maybe you're right, though. Suppose you were all you say; what's the argument?"

It was nothing unique; no job, the wife and three children cryin' for bread, and a disposess notice tacked on the door. Also couldn't I help him out with a ten spot until he could get on his feet. While he was spelli'n' this off smooth and rapid I gives him the up and down.

He don't quite tally with my idea of a typical hash sling. For one thing he's costumed too sporty. Course, the cheap black and white checked suit is a Baxter street bargain that shows as many spots as a leopard, but it ain't the sort a waiter would cling to if it was his last. And the soft collar with the pink and blue stripes is another suspicious item. That face might be a waiter's face, or it might not. One of these maps shaped like a piece of pie and ornamented with a long nose and a pair of close-set shifty eyes. Just as honest as a rat's, them eyes.

Stuckey goes on to give me details about how long he's been on the blue ticket shift, on account of bein' called out on strike and so many of the hotels puttin' Lizzie Maude in the dinin' rooms. Then he switches to how hard it is to buy shoes and things for the kids, and how the little wife would take a job scrubbin' floors only he back ain't strong enough.

"And I tell you, McCabe," he adds, "it's mighty tough luggin' along a family these days."

"Let's see," says I. "You didn't consult me about gettin' married, did you? No, I thought not. So I don't feel more'n half responsible. In fact, I don't quite figure why you come to me at all. Ain't you got any one nearer?"

"I got a brother," says Stuckey. "Runs a plumbin' shop over on 9th avenue. Makes good money, too. Dresses his two kids up on Sunday like prize dolls. But could I pry a dollar out of him? Not if he saw us all starvin' in the gutter. No use askin' him. So when I didn't know which way to turn I thought I'd look up some of my old chop house customers that I used to try so hard to please! There's Prof. McCabe," says I. "He might remember how I—"

"Yes, I get the outline, Stuckey," says I. "And you've most made out a case. Net quite, though. I'm going to think it over. Might want to check you up, too. Now what's the street number? West 43d, eh? Way over, I expect? And where's the brother located?"

He looks kind of dubious when I jots these items down and his jaw



ash can and fetch up coolin' on the curb.

I was just huntin' through a double row of speakin' tube name plates for Jim Stuckey's card when a young riot seems to break loose outside and in dashes a youngster so impetuous that he near knocks the wind out of me. Right on his heels comes half

and a few clothes were draped on the chairs. But no signs of the little wife or the other kids.

"Where's your mom and the others?" says I.

"There's only me and Pop," says he. "The old lady, she flew the coop, long ago."

"Oh, ho!" says I. "Then your pop's



"FOR THE LOVE OF SOUP" SAYS I. "JIM STUCKEY"

says still more as I declines to slip a dozen other boys who seem to be him a five on account. But I've been stung so often on these sad tales that I'm gettin' leery. Still, half an hour later, as I'm orderin' up a good husky lunch includin' a section of deep-dish cherry pie, I can't quite forget the weary sag to Stuckey's shoulders as he shuffles out. And all the afternoon the picture kept comin' up. I could see him draggin' back to the little wife with his chin down, and wavin' away the three hungry youngsters. You know how it gets you?

So about 4 o'clock I jams on my straw lid, turns the studio over to Swifty, and starts uptown. First off I meant to load up with a stock of provisions and arrive like an off season Santa Claus, but on the way I decides that maybe it would be just as well to call on brother before I did that, and ask him what he meant by such stony heart stuff.

As it happens I finds brother plumbin' away active in his basement shop. He don't look like a purse proud plute, either. He's peeled down to his undershirt and is uncertain a couple of new bathtubs as I drifts in. The eloquent way I mentions brother Jim and his starvin' family don't bring any sudden tears of remorse to his eyes.

"Ah, who's been kiddin' you?" says he. "Jim ain't got no family like that, unless he's collected 'em recent. Sure, he was married—for a while. Some moll he picked up when he was chorus man. But they didn't stick together long. She quit him cold, I heard. Skipped out and left him with a brat of hers. Boy, I think I ain't seen him. Don't want to. Or Jim either. He's no good, Jim. I've tried him out until I'm through. Told you he had three starvin' kids, eh? Say, that's rich, that is!"

It was easy to see this brother of Jim's was prejudiced. Plumbers are apt to get that way. They hate the world. You can tell that just by the way they tramp into your house with muddy feet and throw their greasy tool bags down on your best rugs. Ever hear a plumber whistlin' and singin' away at his work? Did you, now?

Anyway, I postpones the Santa Claus act until after I'd counted them three starvin' kids for myself. By the looks of the block that Jim's number was in, it was one where you could starve if you tried. It's lined with five-story double tenements, old style. And the street is full of kids playin' tip-cat and base ball and craps. Babies swarmed on the sidewalks and doorsteps; dirty, healthy lookin' babies, such as poor folks always have—the kind that can roll off a third story window ledge, bounce on an awnin', scamp from an

all set for mayhem, assault and battery and other violence.

"Yah! Catch the welsher!" they're shoutin'. "Head him off, Abie! Soak him, Mickey!"

"Well, well, you young tarriers!" says I. "What's all the rough stuff about?"

"He's a crook!" they yella. "He swiped the pot on us wit' a flam game. He's alias pullin' dat. Turn him loose, Mister, and we'll fix him fer it."

"How about it, kid?" says I, haulin' the youngster out where I can get a look at him. "Have you been doing anything like that?"

But I needn't have asked. One glance into them big innocent blue eyes was enough to discount the evidence of twice as many young toughs. Reg'lar cherub eyes, they are, the kind you see in pictures. Course, he's sort of a messy, ragged cherub. His waist is dirty and tore, his face is smooched up, and his curly, wheat-colored hair looks like it hadn't been disturbed by a comb for days. Yet for all that he's about as ornamental as any nine-year-old boy ought to be. Yes, just about the age of my little Sully, so you can guess I was hopin' he had a good alibi. And he has, too.

"Nah, I didn't swipe nuttin'," says he. "I winned the pennies straight on the toss. They're a bunch of squealers, they are."

This brings out a chorus of howls from the gang and they was for makin' another rush at him, only I blocks 'em off. "Beat it, now," says I, "or some of you'll get cuffed. Here's a dime to pitch for if you ain't satisfied."

Some strategy, that. They leaves us with a whoop and I turns to my unwashed cherub. "What's your name, son?" says I.

"Harold Stuckey, I s'pose," says he.

"Eh?" says I. "Then it must be your dad I'm lookin' for."

"You—you ain't the rent agent, are you?" he demands.

"Nothing like that, Harold," says I. "This is a friendly visit. Your pop at home?"

Harold shakes his curly mop. "Nah," says he. "He's down to Herman's place, next corner, shootin' pool, but he'll be showin' up 'fore long."

"In that case I'll wait," says I, "and get acquainted with the family. Which floor is yours?"

"Top," says Harold, startin' up the stairs.

And after we'd climbed the long, dark flights he tows me to a couple of nearly bare rooms at the back. Old sportin' extras and cigarette stubs cluttered the floor, dirty dishes was set around on the stove and table,

tale about three starvin' kids was a piece of bunk, eh?"

Harold gives me a quick glance from them big eyes of his and proceeds to hedge. "Well," says he, "the others ain't here just now. They—they're out on the street, I expect."

"Are they?" says I. "How old would you say they were, Harold?"

"Why," says he, "they—they're younger than me."

"Considerable, I expect," says I. "And mom's been gone a long time, you say?"

"Well, not so long," says Harold. "I—I forget. Pop can tell you, though."

"I don't doubt it," says I.

Say, I had quite some session with Harold. He was about as willin' a young prevaricator as I've ever run across. His only trouble seemed to be in decidin' just what kind of lies he ought to feed me. And yet, knowin' that there was hardly a word of truth in anything he was saying, I couldn't look into them cherub eyes without wonderin' if my ears were hearin' straight. Nor I couldn't find the heart to tax him with it, either.

I was almost glad when Jim came in to take the strain off'n the kid. He's some jarred to find me there, too.

"It's all up, Stuckey," says I. "I got the whole tale from your brother."

"Ah, he's a crab, he is," says Jim.

"He gave me the dope on you, all right," says I. "So you're a chorus man as well as a waiter, eh?"

"I am when I get on," says Jim. "My voice ain't what it used to be, though."

"Too many paper pipes, I expect," says I. "I thought from your costume you ought to belong with that gang that drifts around Times Square. And I hear the little wife has quit you?"

"Good riddance!" says Jim. "Look what she wished on me, too," and he nods at Harold.

"Looks like the makin' of a fine boy," says I.

"You don't know him," says Jim.

"Just as crooked as his maw, though I expects he gets some of it from his father, whoever he was. I can't do anything with him. And I don't know how to get rid of him."

Well, there's no use goin' on detailin' this interview with Jim Stuckey and Harold. It was soggy, hopeless. Made you feel almost ashamed of the human race. Here was a shiftless, good-for-nothing loafer of a man, and a boy who was growin' up to be a liar and a crook. But how was I goin' to change it? I didn't know the answer. I didn't even make a stab at it.

"You're a fine bird, you are, Jim," says I. "Ex-waiter, ex-chorus man, poolroom hanger-on! That's a swell record. I don't know where you're headed for. The bread line, maybe.

But I can see the lad's finish, and it's—blamed bad."

"If I could only get on my feet again," whines Jim, "I could—"

"No, don't make any promises," says I. "I wouldn't believe a word. You'll always be what you are, or worse. But I'm just fool enough to throw away ten on you. Here it is. No! No, thanks. I'm simply buyin' myself some sleep that I might miss if I kept my money where it belongs. Not a bit of use comin' around after more, though. That's my total investment, and I hope I never make a worse one."

By the time I gets back to the studio I was sore at myself for being so soft in the head, and naturally I works some of it off on Swifty Joe. "Next time don't ask me," says I. "Give 'em the quick run."

"Who?" says Swifty, gawpin'.

"Anybody with three starvin' kids, of course," says I.

"Ahr-r-r chee!" says Swifty. "How do you get that way just on butter-milk? Or is it the heat?" Then he starts for South Brooklyn, where folks talk a language that he can understand easier, leavin' me to lock up the studio.

Some day I'd like to meet the guy who advertises these mail order memory lessons. I'd tell him a few things about how useless all that stuff is. What comes hard for most of us is to forget—such items as Harold and Jim Stuckey, for instance. I don't mean I went around starey-eyed for the next week or so, like a parlor bolshevik plottin' how to make everybody happy by makin' murder an outdoor pastime. I didn't have that pair on my mind so much. But the thoughts of 'em kept comin' up at odd times—when I was shavin', or openin' a three-minute egg. And you know it don't pay to let your mind go shimmyn' off durin' either of them operations. I can almost show you the chin nick I got. No, it's healed up.

Likewise the mental scab I got from visitin' that top floor tenement. I'd handed myself the decision that what I said and did then was just right—only maybe I might have made it a fiver. Anyway, I put it down that I was more or less wise between the ears, no matter what some folks might think. With which I closed the books on it.

Must have been goin' on for a month later when here the other day Swifty tiptoes in where I'm finishin' a session with one of my Wall street reg'lars and announces as respectful as he knows how that there's somebody out front.

"A gent and a—young gentleman," says he.

"Whaddye mean, young gentleman?" says I. "Ain't got an ex-crown prince out there, have you?"

"I wouldn't put it past him, at that," says he.

Which gets me a bit curious, I'll admit. So I slips a dressin' robe over my gym suit before goin' out and stops before the mirror to slick up my hair. Even then I was sorry for a minute or so that I hadn't waited to doll up complete. For this tall party sportin' the black cutaway, the weddin' breakfast pants and the silk lid is sure some one impressive and dignified to behold. I don't need to mention the gray gloves nor the crook-handled walkin' stick, but they're part of the outfit. And not until he sticks out his hand and I gets a full face view that reveals a half portion chin do I guess who it is.

"For the love of soup!" says I. "Jim Stuckey!"

"Not now," says he, flashin' an engraved card. "James Montgomery Stuckey. But I guess you hadn't noticed my son."

"Your—your—Eh?" I finished with a gasp.

Yes, now that I had the clue I could see it must be Harold. But such a Harold! If they was puttin' 'em in stained glass windows accordin' to the latest fashion designs for young gents he would be somethin' like that. Jim Stuckey was dressed up to the minute, and no denyin' it. But Harold, he was attired. That's the only word for it—new knickerbocker suit, so fresh from the tailors you could almost smell the pressin' iron, new shoes, wide white collar, and all the rest. Also he's as clean as if he'd just been unwrapped from the tissue paper. His cherub face is all pink and white, and his wheat-colored hair frames it in neat curls that might have been put in place one by one.

"Gosh!" says I. "He looks too good to be true. How—how did it all happen? Don't tell me some rich aunt has died."

"Better than that," says Mr. Stuckey. "You know that ten you slipped me that day? And the Dutch uncle talk that went with it? Well, they both gave me a jolt. I decided that we must buck up, me and Harold. So we did, some. Anyway, we got cleaned up. I blew two ninety-eight into a wash suit for Harold, and near as much into a fresh shirt for myself. Shaved, and all that. Then we started to look for

(Continued on Seventh Page.)